

(Vicarita) Taṇhā Sutta**The Discourse on Thought-courses Rooted in Craving**

[The 108 thought-courses motivated by craving]

(Aṅguttara Nikāya 4.199/2:211-213)

Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2005

Introduction

One of the key features of the Buddha's teachings is its comprehensiveness, especially with regards to the description of the human condition and the solution of its problems. The most effective way to solve such problems is to work at their root, that is, in the mind itself. Understandably, mental training (usually known as mindfulness exercise or meditation) is the most vital tool in Buddhist spirituality. While formal meditation (especially sitting meditation) is the most common method of personal development, we are often admonished by the Buddha and Dharma teachers to constantly live a mindful life.

Living a mindful life means keeping one's attention anchored in the present moment, constantly vigilant of the fluctuations and caprices of one's mental states. The present-moment mindfulness will notice how the mind races back and forth, going back to the past, looking to the future, and looking at the present often through filtered lenses.

In the Taṇhā (Vicarita) Sutta, the Buddha lists all the possible unwholesome ways of thinking that can arise through thinking about one's own being (the internal aggregates)¹ [§3] or thinking about others (the external aggregates) [§4], in regards to *the three periods of time* (past, future and present). Altogether, there are a total of 108 thoughts, all rooted in craving (*taṇhā*), as listed here:

[3] Thoughts dependent on the internal aggregates (in oneself)	18	
[4] Thoughts dependent on the external aggregates (in another)	<u>18</u>	
TOTAL thought-courses		36
[5] Thought-courses rooted in craving regarding the past	36	
Thought-courses rooted in craving regarding the future	36	
Thought-courses rooted in craving regarding the present	<u>36</u>	
GRAND TOTAL of thought-courses		108

Craving (*taṇhā*) here refers to a sense of lack one perceives in oneself, and led by this false perception, one seeks to fill it, consciously or unconsciously but invariably in a calculative way, with sense-objects. This negative quest can be known from the mental rumblings that arises in this connection. As noted in this sutta, there are 108 of such negative thoughts.

These negative thoughts should simply be noted for what they are: simply as "thoughts." One should mentally disown them: this is not "I," this is not "me," this is not "mine." Or, one could regard such perceptions as "impermanent," applying a teaching given in **the Yamaka Sutta** (S 22.85), as follows:

²Form is impermanent; what is impermanent is suffering; what is suffering has ended and gone away.

Feeling is impermanent; what is impermanent is suffering; what is suffering has ended and gone away.

Perception is impermanent; what is impermanent is suffering; what is suffering has ended and gone away.

¹ "Aggregates" (*khandha*): they are form (*rūpa*), feeling (*vedanā*), perception (*saññā*), formations (*saṅkhārā*), and consciousness (*viññāṇa*). See **Khandha S** (S 22.48/3:47 f) = SD 17.1.

² *Rūpaṃ aniccaṃ... < Vedanā aniccaṃ... Saññā aniccā... Saṅkhārā aniccā... Viññāṇaṃ aniccaṃ... > yad aniccaṃ taṃ dukkhaṃ, yaṃ dukkhaṃ taṃ niruddhaṃ tad atthagataṃ ti.*

Formations are impermanent; what are impermanent are suffering; what are suffering have ended and gone away.

Consciousness is impermanent; what is impermanent is suffering; what is suffering has ended and gone away. (S 22.85.37/3:112)

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The Discourse on Thought-courses Rooted in Craving (A 4.199/2:211-213)

The thought-courses rooted in craving

1 “Monks, I will teach you regarding craving, the sticky³ net that traps,⁴ cast wide into the river,⁵ by which this world is overspread⁶ and covered up like tousled thread of muñja [fine reed] and balbaja [coarse grass], tangled into knots;⁷ that does not go beyond the evil destination, the lower realm, the place of misery, or samsara.⁸

Listen well, and I will speak.”

“Yes, venerable sire,” the monks replied the Blessed One in assent.

The Blessed One said this:

2 “And what, monks, is the sticky net that traps, cast wide into the river; by which this world is overspread and covered up like tousled thread of muñja [tall reed] and balbaja [coarse grass], tangled into knots; that does not go beyond the evil destination, the lower realm, the place of misery, or samsara?

They are these eighteen thought-courses rooted in craving,⁹ dependent on what is internal [in oneself], and these eighteen thought-courses rooted in craving, dependent on what is external [in another].

³ “Sticky,” *visattika*. Comy gives the usual meaning of “clinging” and also that of poisonous (from *visa*) (cf *visa,phala*, SA 1:175).

⁴ Cf *yassa jālinī visattikā taṇhā n’atthi* (For whom there is no craving, no attachment, no trapper with the net) (S 107 = Dh 180).

⁵ “The river,” *saritaṃ*, lit “that which flows.” Cf *samsār’añṇavaṃ taṇhā,saritaṃ ca* (The river of craving and the ocean of samsara) (UA 424).

⁶ “Overspread,” *uddhasto*. CPD says it is pp of *uddhaṃsati*, “(of dust) to rise up, fly up,” and defines it as: 1. risen (sun, dawn) (A 4:205,9); 2. overspread, smothered (A 1:202,33, where PTS has wr *uddhaseta*). Here at A 2:211,32, *uddhasto* has vll *uddhasotā, uddhamso*; AA 3:205,3 = 2:318,29.

⁷ “Like tousled thread...tangled in knots, *tant’ākula,jāto guḷā,guṇṭhika,jāto*. Cf D 2:55 (*guḷā,guṇṭhika,jāto*); S 2:92 (*guḷi,gandika*), 4:158 (*guṇi,guṇika*); DhA 3:297 (*gaṇḍā,gaṇḍa*). S:W (following PED) has: “tangled like a ball of thread, covered as with blight,” which, however, is difficult to imagine of a ball of thread. See JPTS 1919:49. “Of muñja [fine reed] and balbaja [coarse grass],” *muñja,babbaja,bhūto*. The *muñja* (Saccharum muñja Roxb) is a tall sedge-like reed often used in brahminical ritual. The brahminical thread is made from it; and the wearing of the muñja girdle denotes a vow (*vrata*) for the brahmins. It is mentioned at Sn 440, where it alludes to the ancient warrior practice of wearing a crest of muñja reed on their heads to signify that they would not retreat in battle. It is probably dark in colour (*muñja,kesa*, “dark-maned,” D 2:174); *muñja,pādukā*, slippers made of muñja grass (DhA 4:85). The reed itself, as opposed to the sheath is called *isīka* (D 1:77 = M 2:17; J 6:67; Pm 2:211). The *babbaja* (Skt *balbaja*) (Eleusine indica) is a coarse grass, disliked by cattle, but from which rope and slippers are made. It is mentioned in the Vedas (Ṛgveda 8.99.3; Yajurveda 2.2.8, where it is said to be wrapped around a kindling stick). The allusions here are evidently to the two kinds of craving, the higher (divine) and the lower (worldly), both of which bind one to samsara. See M Stutley, *Ancient Indian Magic and Folklore*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980:56 f, 100.

⁸ *Taṇhaṃ vo bhikkhave desessāmi jāliniṃ saritaṃ visaṭṭhaṃ visattikaṃ yāya ayaṃ loko uddhasto pariyaṇaddho tantākula,jāto guḷā,guṇṭhika,jāto muñja,babbaja,bhūto apāyaṃ duggatiṃ vinipātaṃ samsāraṃ nātivattati*.

⁹ *Taṇhā,vicaritāni*, lit, that which are course about due to craving; *vicarita* also means “frequented by.” The pp *vicaritāni* (pl) is related to *vicāra* (n), “discursive thinking,” closely related with *vitakka* (thought-conception). As constituents of the 1st dhyanas, they form the dvandva, *vitakka,vicāra* (initial application and sustained application), which are “speech functions” or verbal formations (*vacī,saṅkhāra*) of the mind, often called “inner speech” (*parole interieure*), but are absent from higher dhyanas. *Vicāra* is also a necessary precondition for speech (M 44.15/1:301). A person without craving still verbalizes, but would not think in the above manner.

The 18 thought-courses dependent on internal aggregates

3 And what, monks, are the eighteen thought-courses rooted in craving, dependent on what is internal [the internal aggregates]?

Monks,¹⁰

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| (1) there is the thought, ‘I am,’ | (<i>asmî ti sati</i>) |
| (2) there is the thought, ‘I am such,’ | (<i>itth’asmî ti hoti</i>) |
| (3) there is the thought, ‘I am like that, too,’ | (<i>eva’smî ti hoti</i>) |
| (4) there is the thought, ‘I am otherwise,’ | (<i>aññatha’smî ti hoti</i>) |
| (5) there is the thought, ‘I do not exist,’ | (<i>asa’smî ti</i>) ¹¹ |
| (6) there is the thought, ‘I exist,’ | (<i>sat’asmî ti</i>) |
| (7) there is the thought, ‘I should be,’ | (<i>san ti hoti</i>) ¹² |
| (8) there is the thought, ‘I should be such,’ | (<i>ittham san ti hoti</i>) |
| (9) there is the thought, ‘I should be like this,’ | (<i>evam san ti hoti</i>) |
| (10) there is the thought, ‘I should be otherwise,’ | (<i>aññathā san ti hoti</i>) |
| (11) there is the thought, ‘May I be,’ | (<i>api ha san ti honti</i>) |
| (12) there is the thought, ‘May I be such,’ | (<i>api ittham san ti hoti</i>) |
| (13) there is the thought, ‘May I be like this,’ | (<i>api evam san ti hoti</i>) |
| (14) there is the thought, ‘May I be otherwise,’ | (<i>api aññathā san ti hoti</i>) |
| (15) there is the thought, ‘I shall be,’ | (<i>bhavissan ti hoti</i>) |
| (16) there is the thought, ‘I shall be such,’ | (<i>ittham bhavissan ti hoti</i>) |
| (17) there is the thought, ‘I shall be like this,’ | (<i>evam bhavissan ti hoti</i>) |
| (18) there is the thought, ‘I shall be otherwise.’ | (<i>aññathā bhavissan ti hoti</i>) |

These, monks, are the eighteen thought-courses rooted in craving, dependent on what is internal

The 18 thought-courses dependent on external aggregates

4 And what, monks, are the eighteen thought-courses rooted in craving, dependent on what is external [the external aggregates]?

Monks,¹³

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| (1) there is the thought, ‘By means of this ¹⁴ I am,’ | (<i>iminā asmî ti sati</i>) |
| (2) there is the thought, ‘By means of this I am such,’ | (<i>iminā itth’asmî ti hoti</i>) |
| (3) there is the thought, ‘By means of this I am like that, too,’ | (<i>iminā eva’smî ti hoti</i>) |
| (4) there is the thought, ‘By means of this I am otherwise,’ | (<i>iminā aññatha’smî to hoti</i>) |
| (5) there is the thought, ‘By means of this I do not exist,’ | (<i>iminā as’asmî ti</i>) |
| (6) there is the thought, ‘By means of this I exist,’ | (<i>iminā sat’asmî ti</i>) |
| (7) there is the thought, ‘By means of this I should be,’ | (<i>iminā san ti hoti</i>) |
| (8) there is the thought, ‘By means of this I should be such,’ | (<i>iminā ittham san ti hoti</i>) |
| (9) there is the thought, ‘By means of this I should be like this,’ | (<i>iminā evam san ti hoti</i>) |
| (10) there is the thought, ‘By means of this I should be otherwise,’ | (<i>iminā aññathā san ti hoti</i>) |

¹⁰ For explanation, see Vbh §§973 f/393-396 & VbhA §§2546-2564/513-516.

¹¹ See CPD: *a-sa(t)*. FL Woodward takes *asasmî* as Skt *asat* + *asmî*, and the following *sat’asmî* as Skt *sat* + *asmî* (A:W 226 n2). Comy & Vbh glosses thus: *nicco’smî*, *dhuvo’smî*, *sassato’smî*, *avipariṇām’asmî* (which Woodward this “is just the opposite of what it means.”) Thānissaro renders the two quotes as “I am bad” and “I am good”—lexically this might be possible (see CPD id), but it clearly does not fit the context here.

¹² *San* = Skt *syam*. Here I follow Woodward, A:W 2:226 n4. Cf PED: Comy & Vbh take *san* = *siyam* throughout. A:PTS read *santi* throughout.

¹³ For explanation, see Vbh §§975 f/396-400.

¹⁴ That is, “by means” of this form (*rūpena*), and the other aggregates (AA).

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| (11) there is the thought, ‘By means of this may I be,’ | (<i>iminā api ha san ti honti</i>) |
| (12) there is the thought, ‘By means of this may I be such,’ | (<i>iminā api ittham san ti hoti</i>) |
| (13) there is the thought, ‘By means of this my I be like this,’ | (<i>iminā api evaṃ san ti hoti</i>) |
| (14) there is the thought, ‘By means of this my I be otherwise,’ | (<i>iminā api aññathā san ti hoti</i>) |
| (15) there is the thought, ‘By means of this I shall be,’ | (<i>iminā bhavissan ti hoti</i>) |
| (16) there is the thought, ‘By means of this I shall be such,’ | (<i>iminā ittham bhavissan ti hoti</i>) |
| (17) there is the thought, ‘By means of this I shall be like this,’ | (<i>iminā evam bhavissan ti hoti</i>) |
| (18) there is the thought, ‘By means of this I shall be otherwise.’ | (<i>iminā aññathā bhavissan ti hoti</i>) |

These are the eighteen thoughts rooted in craving, dependent on what external.

The 108 thought-courses rooted in craving

5 Thus are the eighteen thought-courses rooted in craving, dependent on what is internal, and the eighteen thought-courses rooted in craving, dependent on what is external.

These are called the thirty-six thought-courses rooted in craving.

Thus, monks, with the thirty-six thought-courses regarding the past, thirty-six thought-courses rooted in craving regarding the future, and thirty-six thought-courses rooted in craving regarding the present, there are the one hundred and eight thought-courses rooted in craving.

6 This, monks, is the sticky net that traps, cast wide into the river; by which this world is over-spread and covered up like tousled thread of muñja [tall reed] and balbaja [coarse grass], tangled into knots; that does not go beyond the evil destination, the lower realm, the place of misery, or samsara.”

—evaṃ—

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